



STATEMENT BY

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on early childhood research and the Administration's plans to improve Head Start. My testimony will focus on what we know from our most recent research on levels of learning and school readiness for young children and how we are using this knowledge to improve the quality and effectiveness of Head Start.

Head Start was launched in 1965 as part of a bold, "big idea" – that no child should be disadvantaged in their education because of the circumstances of their birth. For 38 years this country has demonstrated a national, bipartisan commitment to this "big idea". We have worked together to provide adequate funding for the Head Start program and have shown a willingness to make changes when necessary to improve outcomes for children. We all have the same goal – to prepare these children for success in school and life. Given that goal, none of us should be satisfied until we have achieved the vision reflected in this "big idea" – that economically disadvantaged children should arrive at school on a level playing field with their more economically advantaged peers. Anything short of achieving this goal should not be seen as a failure of Head Start, but as a challenge for us to do even better.

Consequently, when recent research showed that Head Start graduates continued to lag significantly behind age norms on a number of important indicators of emerging literacy and numeracy skills, the President and Secretary Thompson sent a clear message to my agency: more had to be done to strengthen the educational outcomes for children. As part of the President's *Good Start, Grow Smart* initiative, we were directed to increase the knowledge and skills of Head Start teachers in the area of preschool language and literacy

and to create and manage a National Reporting System (NRS) that will help measure children's progress in mastering the skills necessary to prepare them for a lifetime of learning.

Furthermore, the broader social context has changed dramatically since 1965 when many States were just beginning to implement universal kindergarten and no State had a publicly funded preschool program primarily targeted to low-income children. Hence, in 1965 there was no need for Head Start to coordinate with State-run preschool programs because there weren't any. Today, more than 40 States and the District of Columbia have early childhood programs of their own. Numerous States are revising the standards for child care and preschool programs. And as research has suggested the importance of providing comprehensive services, States now are involved in trying to integrate a multitude of other programs aimed at young children and their families – from Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, to the State Children's Health Insurance Program and Medicaid, to special education, disabilities screening, and assessments—and the list goes on.

In response to the President and Secretary Thompson's charge and the changing social context, we looked for ways to improve the effectiveness of the Head Start program. Much about the program was working, and working well, but we know the program needs to move ahead—particularly in the area of educational gains and coordination. I would like to briefly describe our on-going efforts to improve the educational component of Head Start, as well as provide details on the President's innovative proposal for Head Start.

What We Know

Federal and State governments currently spend some \$23 billion each year for child care and preschool education—and much, much more than that when you consider the other health, nutrition, and welfare-related programs that serve these same children and families. Never has there been such a clear commitment on the part of Federal and State governments to enhance the well-being of children and families. Never have we known so much about what children need for healthy growth and development. Never have so many programs been focused on meeting these needs of our most vulnerable citizens.

Unfortunately, in all of this good news Head Start, as one of those programs designed to improve the early literacy skills and overall development of low-income children, does only an okay job -- not a terrific or consistent job -- of producing the school readiness we all seek.

After nearly 40 years of experience, Head Start children, on average, still do not enter school at the same level as their more economically advantaged peers. Additionally, we continue to see a disturbing lack of coordination among programs and services designed to meet the needs of this population. This has resulted in large gaps and uneven service areas in the early childhood “safety net” for low-income children and their families.

Continuing difficulties in coordination across early childhood education programs and child care also contribute to persistent problems of under-enrollment in many Head Start programs.

Improving School Readiness

When the school readiness of the nation's poorest children is assessed, it becomes clear that Head Start is not eliminating the gap that low-income children experience in the educational skills and knowledge needed for school compared to their more economically advantaged peers. Most importantly, low-income children graduating from Head Start continue to perform significantly below their more advantaged peers in reading and mathematics when they enter school.

As my colleagues here will help describe, certain skills and abilities are early and strong markers of school readiness. For example, we know that children who recognize letters, who are read to at least three times a week, who recognize basic numbers and shapes, and who demonstrate an understanding of the mathematical concept of relative size as they enter kindergarten have significantly higher reading skills in the spring of first grade than children who do not have these skills.

Unfortunately, Head Start is not being successful enough in enhancing these critical language, pre-reading, and pre-mathematics skills. Data on outcomes for children and families in the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) demonstrate the low scores and limited progress of Head Start children in key areas. Although Head Start children are making some progress in some areas, including gains in book knowledge and print conventions and growth in social skills and reduction in hyperactive behavior during the Head Start year, as a group they continue to fall below the 50th percentile across all major domains. Moreover:

- The level of children's achievement in letter-recognition is far below the majority of U.S. children who know all letters of the alphabet upon entering kindergarten, according to the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of the Kindergarten Class of 1998.
- Spanish-speaking children in Head Start did not gain at all in letter recognition skills from fall to spring of the Head Start year.
- Although writing scores increased 2 points from 85.1 in the fall to 87.1 in the spring of the Head Start year (with a mean score of 100), this was a drop from 1997 when scores increased 3.8 points in writing.
- Children's vocabulary scores were about 10 points below the average or mean standard score of 100.
- Children made statistically significant progress in early math between the fall (87.9) and spring (89.0) of the Head Start year. But this difference is not going to reduce the gap with national averages.
- Children with overall lower levels of knowledge and skill showed larger gains during the year compared with children who entered with higher levels of knowledge. However, they too still lagged far behind national averages.

The Bottom Line: School Readiness

The bottom line for the President, Secretary Thompson, and me is improving the school readiness of Head Start children. Given what we know about the actual progress of

children in Head Start, we must do more to ensure that they enter kindergarten with strong early literacy, numeracy and vocabulary skills.

In responding to this challenge, the Head Start Bureau has undertaken a number of efforts aimed at bolstering the school-readiness of Head Start children. The Strategic Teacher Education Program, STEP, launched in the summer of 2002, was designed to ensure that every Head Start program and every classroom teacher have a fundamental knowledge of early development and literacy, and of state-of-the-art early literacy teaching techniques. More than 3,300 local program teachers and supervisors have received this training and have served as "trainers" to the nearly 50,000 Head Start teachers across the country. I am pleased to report that trainers, supervisors and teachers are telling us that the STEP training is making a difference in their classrooms.

The Head Start Bureau also hosted national training conferences on mentor-coaching and social-emotional development. These events expanded the skills of teachers and supervisors in fostering effective classroom practices and provided follow up in Head Start classrooms. A national Web-based resource, called STEP-Net, has been created to help early literacy specialists access resources and tools and to exchange information and promising practices.

Program Accountability

The President also has made accountability a guiding principle of this Administration. In keeping with that principle, we are working to make sure that we measure the outcomes of our efforts, not merely processes and procedures. I think we all agree that in the end,

the most important indicator of any program's efficacy is whether it is, in fact, helping those it is intended to help. As such, *Good Start, Grow Smart* calls for not only improving and strengthening the Head Start program through intense, large-scale efforts in the areas of early language and literacy, but also for a method to track the results of our efforts.

Consequently, this fall we began implementing assessments of the school readiness of all the four-year old children in Head Start, with 436,000 children currently represented in the fall data. The Head Start National Reporting System (NRS) was developed after extensive consultation with the field and with the advice of technical experts, and was extensively field-tested before being implemented in local programs. The NRS focuses on the educational measures Congress identified in the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start and where existing measures could best meet scientific standards. Moreover, the NRS does not duplicate information or research strategies already underway in FACES or in the Congressionally-mandated Head Start Impact Study, the results of which are not yet available.

Information from the National Reporting System will be used not to "grade" programs, but to help us identify which programs are achieving good outcomes for children and which may require additional training and technical assistance in order to ensure that all Head Start programs are providing a high quality early childhood experience for the children under their charge.

Better Coordination

Historically, the system of early care and education in the United States has been fragmented. For too long now, child care programs and early education programs have existed in isolation from one another. Indeed, a 1999 study by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) found sixty-nine Federal programs, administered by nine different Federal agencies and departments, provided or supported education and care for children under age 5. GAO noted that when multiple agencies manage multiple early childhood programs, mission fragmentation and program overlap can occur and thereby create an environment in which programs do not serve participants as efficiently or effectively as possible.

State child care and education administrators interviewed by GAO reported that factors impeding collaboration at the State level include differing eligibility requirements; “turf” issues, such as concerns about losing program authority; lack of accurate or complete information on various programs; and the lack of funding-support collaborative strategies. State officials expressed concerns that their power or authority would be reduced by collaboration, and that they would be unwilling to share program funds.

The creation of an integrated, well-coordinated early care and education system for low-income children has broad support from members of the early childhood field, the business community and policymakers. The National Governors’ Association (NGA), for example, strongly supports developing collaborative partnerships and increasing

coordination of services as a means of creating a seamless and accessible system of care for low-income children and their parents.

Despite the agreement, the reality is quite different in most States. Although many States have demonstrated significant interest in, and commitment to, building strong early childhood systems in recent years, no State has a comprehensive system of early care and education that makes high quality services available to all low-income families who want them for their children.

To address these issues, the President's FY 2005 budget seeks to fund, through a competitive demonstration, up to 9 State pilots in order to begin to identify multiple approaches for a statewide coordinated, integrated system of early childhood services for low-income children and their families.

The major goal of this demonstration is to implement better coordination across programs in order to improve access to high quality early childhood services that lead to school readiness of low-income children. Inherent in this goal is the need to eliminate duplication and improve collaboration within communities while raising the standards of quality across Head Start, child care, State pre-k, and other settings where economically disadvantaged children spend time.

This demonstration would be offered through full and open competition among interested applicant-States. In these demonstrations, we hope to identify models of State

effectiveness in creating and supporting a more integrated infrastructure for effective early childhood services for low-income children and their families.

In order for a State's demonstration plan to be approved, it would have to commit to continue to serve at least as many Head Start eligible children with Head Start funds as are currently enrolled in Head Start; develop and implement standards that meet or exceed current Head Start standards; maintain existing State funding for preschool programs; provide comprehensive services – including health, parental and social services – to children supported with Head Start funds; and conduct an evaluation of the demonstration. Forty-five million dollars would be available to help States offset the costs of administering this demonstration program.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I can assure you that the Administration is committed to strengthening the quality of Head Start and improving the coordination of services to benefit school readiness for low-income preschool children. Research evidence is clearly showing that we can do better in helping low-income children achieve in all early childhood programs not just in Head Start and we must do better.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your interest in hearing about early childhood research related to Head Start and for providing me the opportunity to share our vision for strengthening the program.

